

In a recent speech, former president Obama lamented what he called the “cancel culture” on college campuses, meaning students being so fixed in a political position that they purposefully identify a weak opposing view of others to knock down, thereby justifying their own. But effective civic participation means more than tolerance of other points of view.

Requiring a higher level of discourse

Civic engagement requires a higher level of discourse that is outcome-based, considering priorities, risks, benefits and consequences of actions.

structure and function of governance that allow individual to practice citizenship as a means of "securing the blessing of liberty."

Educating and creating better citizens require a deeper understanding of our democratic structure, the Constitution, the three branches of government, how they work, and the role of citizens in maintaining, protecting and reforming them where they live.

At the center of college learning

Accordingly, the goal of civic participation should be at the center of college learning, not on the periphery. It is not something to be left to the political science or history department. Basic principles of civic participation can be engaged across the curriculum, whether the humanities, science or art. To argue that such integration would politicize the academy should be anticipated, but should not be accepted as a means of deflection from what needs to be accomplished.

This is a good time for college presidents to be bold, not timid, about leading on civic learning.

Here is what they can do:

- Take more risks; don't play it safe. Actively plan to speak publicly on important contemporary policy issues, tied to the meaning to citizenship. Tell trustees, the faculty, elected officials and others what they plan to talk about in advance, and do it. Promote the positive consequences of informed and active citizenship, linked to democratic outcomes and the common good;
- Make civic learning mission-centered, to provide a deeper understanding of how civic participation supports taking legitimate action in a democracy. Integrate civic learning across the curriculum. Every academic discipline is affected by local, state and federal entities that establish, administer or interpret law and regulation based on constitutional principles. Civic learning and participation can be examined across the university, through reading, writing, art, research, simulation and field experience, without wandering into partisan political territory.

- Build stronger partnership with school and organization that promote civic learning and invite practitioner to the campus to support the faculty and to share firsthand knowledge with student about how government work, and its effect on their lives.

Many people have responsibility for leading in a democracy. It takes citizens who are informed about civic structure and function to make democracy work in practice. This need to be a higher priority for colleges. This is where college presidents can lead.

Darryl G. Greer

Darryl Greer, PhD, has advised, recruited and evaluated college presidents, nationally. He was Senior Fellow at Stockton University, 2012-2017 and CEO, NJ Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1988-2011.